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Marco Tavanti  
*DePaul University*

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## Acteal: Open Wounds on Indigenous Rights

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."





*Na wahine maoli (Native women), oil on canvas*

# ACTEAL: OPEN WOUNDS ON INDIGENOUS RIGHTS

Marco Tavanti  
DePaul University

After months of hostilities, displacements and repression, on December 22, 1997 gunmen came into the Maya-Tzotzil village of Acteal in the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico.<sup>1</sup> After several hours of shooting with high caliber weapons for the exclusive use of the army, they had wounded many and killed 45 innocent people, including 21 women and 15 children.<sup>2</sup> Since the Acteal massacre, 77 people were convicted in connection with the killings; 57 of them remain in prison after August 12, 2009 when the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) freed 20 others on grounds of unclear and improper investigations.<sup>3</sup> They were sentenced to 36 years in prison but they spent less than 12 year in jail. The victims -members of the pacifist *Civil Society Las Abejas (Bees)*- were closely connected with the progressive side of the Catholic Church headed at that time by Bishop Samuel Ruiz. They were also sympathizing with the Zapatista rebels and their indigenous demands for democracy, land, justice, education and health.<sup>4</sup> Most of those convicted were government loyalists associated with the PRI party and conservative evangelical churches. On October 12, 2009 during a press conference that took place in the Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (*Frayba*) headquarters, *Las Abejas* expressed their safety concerns as Mexican Supreme Court is considering the release of other 31 prisoners that were sentenced as perpetrators of the Acteal Massacre.<sup>5</sup>

In spite *Las Abejas'* denouncement of impunity and their request to bring to justice all the material and intellectual actors of the massacre, the judicial system of Mexico seems to go in a different direction. While Mexican and American evangelicals have been pressuring the Mexican government for the release of "innocent" people,<sup>6</sup> *Las Abejas* and numerous nongovernmental organizations interpret the Acteal Massacre as the result of the government's counterinsurgency strategy to fight the *Zapatista* rebels.<sup>7</sup> The *Frayba* interprets the Supreme Court's unilateral decisions as a threat to community security completely undermining the survivors' demands for justice, accountability and reparation.<sup>8</sup>

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch echoed *Frayba* and *Las Abejas* to denounce the situation of impunity in Mexico and the lack of a proper system that would guarantee proper justice procedures to indigenous claims for human rights.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Acteal reminds us how human rights accountability and the fight against impunity are essential for the democratization of Mexico.<sup>10</sup> The aftermath of the Acteal massacre, reaffirmed by these recent court decisions, indicates another sad reality: the inability to consider indigenous rights and culture as part of the legal and societal fabric of Chiapas and Mexico.<sup>11</sup> The Zapatista claims for the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights and culture, as defined in the 1996 San Andres Peace Accords, are still a remote reality from the real discrimination experienced by the 52 indigenous ethnic groups of Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The Chiapas indigenous struggle, headed by the Zapatista movement, has been instrumental to highlight the basic demands that indigenous populations have for human rights, land rights and cultural rights along with their demand for "democracy, peace, justice and dignity." These basic and indigenous-specific rights have been collected in the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in September 13, 2007.<sup>13</sup> Despite this important achievement, indigenous rights continue to be an issue for countries and private interests that consider self-determination and access to lands, territories and resources as some of the most contested and controversial issues on indigenous rights.<sup>14</sup>

Acteal is an open wound in the Latin American and worldwide indigenous quest for justice.<sup>15</sup> It also represents the violent effect on poor indigenous communities struggling for their survival that is linked to lands and resources.<sup>16</sup> For the survivors of the massacre, represented by the *Civil Society Las Abejas*, the issues of justice and land rights are nothing new in their organizational history and collective memories as indigenous Mayan people.<sup>16</sup> Sebastian Perez himself, the current president of *Las Abejas* was one of the three people unjustly incarcerated in 1992 after they heroically helped wounded indigenous Maya-Tzotziles involved in a land conflict.<sup>18</sup> The reality of injustice and impunity in Chiapas, like in other indigenous and impoverished states of



Mexico, is not only a reflection of poor public systems, it also shows ongoing intolerance, discrimination and racism toward indigenous people.<sup>19</sup> Besides the Chiapas government's various attempts to integrate indigenous normative systems, the reality is still quite far from a true recognition of indigenous rights for self-determination, cultural diversity and natural resources. The colorful reality of Chiapas, with its rich lands, cultures and resources cannot be separated from the indigenous people (the people of the color of the earth) and their basic demands for education, health, land, water, democracy, justice and dignity.<sup>20</sup> The indigenous people of Chiapas don't resist globalization or government authorities per se. They want to be recognized as equal in terms of their rights and dignity as people, citizens and human beings. They do not want to be victims of political manipulations or servants of exploitative economic plans that marginalize and exclude them. They want a true participatory development process that would give them and their environment a sustainable future.<sup>21</sup>

Students of the DePaul Chiapas programs on *Sustainable Development* (School of Public Service) and on *Human Rights* (Law School) travel yearly to Acteal to learn about the convergence of indigenous rights and land rights.<sup>22</sup> They meet with representatives from *Las Abejas* and survivors of the massacre. They directly listen to their quest for human rights along with their struggle for justice and collective actions toward better living conditions. They discover how Acteal and the Chiapas indigenous movement of resistance represent many conflicts, issues and struggles worldwide.<sup>23</sup> They revisit their assumptions about indigenous resistance and understand how communities like those of Acteal want development for them and the future generation but without having to renounce their land rights and cultural values. DePaul University has a long history of presence and collaboration in Chiapas. In 1998, just a few months after the Acteal massacre faculty and students began travelling to Chiapas to assist indigenous and nongovernmental organizations with human rights trainings, organizational development, fundraising plans and other collaborative initiatives. Chiapas indigenous people know that our most important service to them is to speak about their struggle and demands back in our schools and countries. That is why alumni of the DePaul Chiapas Programs have held and presented in conferences, founded organizations, lead important fundraising events and coordinated speaking tours for indigenous representatives in the United States. This year, DePaul Chiapas programs alumni reached another level of international service. A group went back to Chiapas and, in collaboration with the program coordinator and *Frayba*, they were able to promote and mediate dialogue between two divided sides of *Las Abejas*. Then, they presented DePaul University's activities and methodologies in Chiapas at the 62nd United Nations Conference for Nongovernmental Organizations in Mexico City on September 9-11, 2009.

DePaul, the largest Catholic American University, has another layer or potentials and responsibilities in its relations with Chiapas - its religious values and identity. Both the 1997 Acteal massacre and the 2009 release decisions have numerous connections with Churches and religions. The *Civil Society Las Abejas* itself emerged more than 40 years of pastoral work inspired by the liberation theology of the Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas. While some of the *Abejas* are Presbyterians, the large majority identify themselves with the progressive side of the Catholic Church and the indigenous

demands formulated after the 1974 Indigenous Congress coordinated by Bishop Ruiz. Although the Acteal massacre is far from being a religious conflict, it is true that religious worldviews and the Church's political positions have influenced – and in some cases legitimized – these events.<sup>24</sup> The legal decision of the Mexican Supreme Court resulted also from a strong pressure and campaign from American-backed Mexican Evangelical Churches. Most evangelical organizations describe the decision of freeing the men convicted in relation to the Acteal case “a positive response to their prayers” in support of their fellow converted Christians. Their pastors and churches have claimed the imprisoned people to be “Christian martyrs” and “innocent people” unjustly and improperly accused to have taken part in the massacre.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the root of the Chiapas conflict is more economic and political than religious or communitarian. Yet, the fact that most of the victims of the massacre were associated with the progressive Catholic Church of the Diocese of San Cristobal de Las Casas, while most of the perpetrators were associated with the Presbyterian conservative Church carries important responsibilities for religious based institutions.<sup>26</sup> Aware of this, DePaul Chiapas alumni are currently working in preparation of a speaking tour for Chiapas indigenous representatives that will meet with Catholic and Presbyterian universities and colleges.

While US mainstream media limitedly portrayed the news on the case of Acteal in Chiapas and Mexico, they largely missed the symbolic significance that Acteal has for indigenous human rights struggles in Chiapas and around the world. When I visited Acteal a few months after the massacre, the *Mesa Directiva* (board of directors) of *Las Abejas* had begun putting pins in a world map for representing the countries of origin of the many people visiting the site.<sup>27</sup> Besides interpreting Acteal at the center of the world – a phenomenon observed in most world populations – they consciously recognized how the blood of the martyrs of Acteal could serve the indigenous quest for rights, recognition, respect and dignity. They felt that finally the world was watching their marginalization and suffering. They said “the world finally can see through the eyes of Zenaida,” one of the survivor children of Acteal who had a bullet trespassing her skull. Zenaida became blind for this, but through her sacrifice and the suffering of the victims, the survivors and the internally displaced people, the world was finally able to pay attention to the reality of paramilitarization, systemic violence and repression. Participants in DePaul Chiapas Programs have learned and are now voices of an important message to the world. They recognize that Acteal is here and now in its symbolic meanings. The Chiapas indigenous and land struggle too is linked to the Chicago and international struggles for immigrant rights. The *Pillar of Shame* – a sculpture of Danish artist Jens Galschiot Christophersen – has been symbolically placed at the entrance of Acteal not only to remember the human atrocity in the massacre, but also for symbolically linking Acteal to other pillars of shamed placed in other sites like Auschwitz, Tiananmen Square, Rwanda and Chechnya, among others. Like these many others sad chapters of our human history, Acteal is a reminder that the survival of indigenous people depends on our awareness, recognition and respect for indigenous rights. The preservation of our fragile planet itself depends intricately on the preservation and sustainability of indigenous diversities in our global societies.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hernández Castillo, R. A. (2001). *The other word: Women and*



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**MARCO TAVANTI** is an Associate Professor at DePaul University and Director of the Sustainable Chiapas Program in the School of Public Service. He has been collaborating with Chiapas based organizations since 1998. His book on *Las Abejas* (Routledge 2003) is a major ethnographic work on the organizational identity and on the meaning of Acteal.  
Contact: [mtavanti@depaul.edu](mailto:mtavanti@depaul.edu)

**About art by MIKI'ALA CATALFANO from 'A Native Daughter', HAUNANI-KAY TRASK:**  
*Hawai'i - the word, the vision, the sound in the mind - is the fragrance and feel of soft kindness. Above all, Hawai'i is 'she,' the Western image of the Native 'female' in her magical allure.*

**From NANA I KE KUMU, MARY KAWENA PUKU'I:**  
*In Hawaiian dream lore, dreaming of being nude meant that a blood relative would meet with illness, misfortune in varying degrees, or even death... These nudity dreams acquired their symbolic meanings from actual practices from ancient times. The pa'u (skirt) or malo (loin cloth) was removed in ceremonies of punishment, humiliation and death. Men destined for human*



sacrifice were stripped naked. Men and women took off their last vestige of covering to signify abject, fearful submission or an appeal for mercy... Mourners pupule (crazed) with grief over a death sometimes exposed themselves... In this practice, nudity was nonsexual and associated with some traumatic experience.

#### MIKI'ALA CATALFANO'S VOICE:

An airline ad showed a Native female wearing very little, and the headline said "Follow Me Home." The romantic image of Native Hawaiian women is being used to sell potato chips, popcorn, plumbing services, airline tickets... you name it. This makes me think of jigging, dancing hula girls on dashboards, grass skirts, lu'au parties, tourists recanting their trips to me when they find out I'm Hawaiian, people asking me to name their dogs or their events in Hawaiian, people asking me how to say random things in Hawaiian as a joke, people pretending to speak Hawaiian, people referencing sexy hula girls and how they'd love to visit and hook up with one, people who ask me to tell them where to go to have the "authentic" Hawaiian experience (Where do the locals go?) They couldn't handle the "authentic" Hawaiian experience, having to overhear one haole tell another haole what the state of Hawai'i is in a smug, matter-of-fact declaration right over my head as if I was invisible, having to live here and not at home because it's so fucking expensive my whole fucking family moved away and left me there alone and I couldn't take it, and when I ran in to trouble I left to be with them and I don't know how I'll ever get home now because Hawai'i has become the land of the very rich or the very poor and getting worse with every passing day, running into Hawaiians who were raised away from the islands who know nothing about who they are, having people call the U.S. continent the "mainland" as if Hawai'i is second and subordinate to it. Having to say "I don't know" when I'm asked something about Hawaiian history because I am still learning even though I went to a school for Native Hawaiians, having my mother tell me not to take Hawaiian language in high school because she didn't think it would be of any use, being prepared to "assimilate" into western culture through some of the curriculum of my Hawaiian school, having some haole man express surprise that I was a Hawaiian girl because I spoke such good English, feeling ashamed of my being proud to be able to speak good English, feeling sad when I witnessed racial hostility between haoles and Hawaiians, feeling angry and helpless to hear about some haole in a surf line-up telling my friend how he was a descendant of the man who held the gun to Queen Lili'uokalani's head when American businessmen illegally took control of the Hawaiian Monarchy, having to pay to go to Waimea Falls on the north shore where I grew up because it is now a tourist attraction, having lawyers determine that it is discrimination to only allow Hawaiians in my Hawaiian school though Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop set aside her lands and assets solely for the purpose of providing for children of Native Hawaiian descent, having no family stories beyond my grandmother's generation, having missionaries come and tell the people there is only one god, growing up hearing that Hawaiians are "stupid" and "lazy."